

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

12TH FEBRUARY 2003

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS IN WALES

LGH 04-03 (p1)

Purpose

1. To inform the Committee of the proposed courses of action in relation to the recommendations of the report.

Recommendation

2. That the committee considers the proposals from the Assembly Minister.

Proposed Way Forward

3. In relation to the points listed in paragraph 6, I now propose to establish a Working Group of officials to take forward these recommendations with a timetable of reporting back to the Committee by the end of March.
4. In relation to the points listed in paragraph 7, I propose to write to the WLGA commending these recommendations and asking them to urge local authorities to implement them.
5. I also propose to write to Professor Sunderland to inform him of the progress made on these matters and also request that he take on board the recommendation in paragraph 8 in his capacity as Chair of the research study looking into the role, functions and future potential of town and community councils in Wales.

Proposals based on the Results of the Consultation on the Recommendations of the Sunderland Report

6. **None of the respondents to the Consultation opposed the following**

recommendations of the Sunderland Report. It is now proposed that preparations are made for their implementation and to this end a working group should be formed consisting of officials from the Assembly Government, WLGA, Association of Electoral Administrators, the Electoral Commission and, in relation to accessibility matters, the Disability Rights Commission

- *We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government ask the Electoral Commission, in pursuit of its Public Awareness Strategy, to undertake an information campaign in Wales. The campaign should seek both to explain which tier of authority is responsible for which public services in Wales, and to provide information about what local government does and how it works. The campaign should be organised in time to inform voters before the next local government elections in 2004.*
- *We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government, in consultation with local government, puts in place procedures to permit the collection, on a systematic basis throughout Wales, of statistics on turnout at local government elections, based on ballot paper account data. These procedures should be in place in time for the next round of elections in 2004.*
- *We recommend first, that the Welsh Assembly Government issue guidance requesting councillors to produce "annual reports" that summarise their own activities (rather than those of the council as a whole) on behalf of local people, and secondly, that councillors ensure wide publicity is given to the timing and location of their advice centres or surgeries, which should be held in easily accessible locations.*
- *We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government work with the Electoral Commission to produce a (bilingual) video explaining the practical aspects of voting, and arrange for it to be made widely available, particularly to young people who will shortly become eligible to vote.*
- *We recommend that the freepost facility (for delivering candidates' election campaign leaflets to voters) be extended to local government elections, and that the National Assembly makes appropriate provision for this in its budgets for years in which local government elections occur.*
- *We recommend that voting hours for local government elections be extended to be consistent with those for parliamentary and National Assembly elections i.e. 7.00am to 10.00pm.*
- *We recommend that nomination forms for candidates should be available on-line, and that they should also be easily obtainable and returnable by post rather than in person as some authorities require.*
- *We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association should build on their recent Widening Participation seminars through publicity in the ethnic minority press and similar outlets on standing for election. Such publicity could usefully*

refer to examples of role models drawn from currently under-represented groups to illustrate the contribution such people can play in a healthy local democracy.

- We recommend that public sector organisations review their existing special leave arrangements for staff wishing to undertake council service. We note that up to 18 days paid leave per annum is normally available, but this can only go some way to covering the 90 hours per month which councillors on average spend on council service. We also recommend that public sector employers, as they increasingly move towards "competency frameworks" in assessing staff for promotion, take full and proper account of the skills and abilities which their employees who are councillors have to demonstrate as members of local authorities.*
- We recommend that private sector employers be encouraged to publish their policies for allowing their employees time off for public service (including elected public service), and we recommend the Welsh Assembly Government, and other public sector organisations, to take account of those statements in their procurement practices.*
- We recommend the Welsh Assembly Government to consider, in consultation with its partners, whether it would be practicable to introduce a compensation scheme for private and voluntary sector employers to permit them to allow their employees time off for council service. Compensation for self-employed people for time given for council service should also be considered in any such arrangements.*
- We recommend the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association jointly to establish and run an annual award scheme which recognises private and voluntary employers who are most supportive of employees wishing to serve as councillors.*
- We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government endorse the Wales Charter for Councillors as a statement of aspiration, and discuss with its partners in the partnership councils what steps can now be taken by interested parties to ensure that the Charter's provisions are given full effect.*
- We recommend Welsh local authorities to begin to consider now in light of the experience of English authorities in May 2002 and taking account of the report of the Independent Commission on Alternative Voting Methods published earlier this year, what innovative electoral arrangements based on technological development they might want to pilot in 2004; and we suggest that the Welsh Local Government Association might usefully perform a co-ordinating role so that a comprehensive range of innovative arrangements is tested across Wales at that time.*

1. The following recommendations were supported and require action by local

authorities to whom they are now commended

- *We recommend Welsh local authorities to begin to consider now in light of the experience of English authorities in May 2002 and taking account of the report of the Independent Commission on Alternative Voting Methods published earlier this year, what innovative electoral arrangements based on technological development they might want to pilot in 2004; and we suggest that the Welsh Local Government Association might usefully perform a co-ordinating role so that a comprehensive range of innovative arrangements is tested across Wales at that time.*
- *We recommend each local authority in Wales to consider carefully what steps it can take, as Active Citizenship enters the National Curriculum, to raise the profile and enhance the understanding of local government by young people. Each authority will want to tailor its programme to local circumstances and different age-groups, but such action might for example include role-play exercises of the type described above, perhaps visits to schools by local authority members and staff, as well as mock elections held in parallel with local government elections in 2004.*
- *We recommend that councils review their existing training and induction programmes for new councillors and bring them fully up to date with the modernising agenda. We hope that examples of best practice in this respect can be widely shared among authorities. Informal mentoring schemes for new members may have a part to play in this.*
- *We recommend that each authority should work with local political parties and with community groups to promote the idea of council membership among local people. We draw attention to the innovative magistrate shadowing scheme organised for members of ethnic minority communities by Operation Black Vote, and suggest that authorities consider similar councillor shadowing schemes, particularly for members of minority communities. It would be helpful if the Welsh Local Government Association produced guidance for its member authorities on the action they can properly take to increase the size, and enhance the diversity, of the pool of potential candidates. Political parties and organisations representing community groups should consider what action can be taken locally to encourage more people to consider becoming candidates.*
- *We recommend that each authority "go out to the people" by holding some committee meetings in publicly accessible venues throughout the authority's area in addition to, or instead of, meetings in council offices. These might be policy meetings particularly relevant to the locality, for example on planning issues. Alternatively, they could take the form of Question and Answer or "open-mike" sessions on issues of general importance; they could provide the electorate with opportunities to question cabinet members about specific policy initiatives or aspects of the Best Value or Improvement process, in addition to more detailed questions about local service provision.*
- *We recommend each authority to review its strategy for publicising its activities through local media, communication with local community groups and use of web-sites. At present, some*

authorities' web-sites are extremely informative about council and committee meetings, agendas and minutes, whereas others have little such information. We believe that every council's web-site should contain comprehensive material of this kind.

- *We recommend that councils establish formal methods for handling petitions from local people. These methods should include a provision for petitioners to address the appropriate council or committee meeting for a short period before debate on the issue begins. The authority's willingness to receive and consider petitions in this way should be widely publicised (and perhaps petition forms made easily available, either on-line or through more traditional mechanisms).*

1. It is proposed that the following recommendation which was supported is referred to the current review of town and community councils in Wales.

- *We recommend the Welsh Assembly Government, after consultation with the Associations representing town and community councils in Wales, to issue guidance to community councils that vacancies to be filled by co-option should be widely advertised in their areas, with particular attention paid to informing local community groups and young peoples' organisations about these vacancies.*